

Attack on Pearl Harbor Stuns Sailors, Torpedoes Ravage The USS Oklahoma on That Day of Infamy -- Dec. 7, 1941

ROY STEWART

Editor's note: This is the second in a series on some of the happenings during World War II. Roy Stewart, Fayetteville-Blanchester Road, Blanchester, was aboard the USS Oklahoma when the U.S. Fleet was attacked in Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941 — the beginning of World War II. Eight minutes after the first torpedo hit the battleship, the ship rolled on its side and sank, taking many of its crew with it. Stewart was one of the lucky sailors — he was a survivor.

By ROSE COOPER
Air attack, air attack! This is no drill!

Roy Stewart, Fayetteville-Blanchester Road, Blanchester, still remembers vividly those words as they were broadcast over the loud speakers on his ship — the USS Oklahoma — on Dec. 7, 1941.

The time was 7:55 on a sunny Sunday morning. His ship was docked along Battleship Row next to Ford Island in Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian Islands. Eight minutes later the Oklahoma turned onto its side and capsized. Five torpedoes hit their mark and the grand battleship was devastated.

This attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor — a U.S. Naval base — prompted the United States to enter World War II, the most destructive war in history.

Sailors on deck and in their living and working spaces throughout the ship were stunned and stopped short in whatever they were doing — walking, talking, shaving, showering. Though they had been trained to react quickly in emergencies, momentarily they froze in place, trying to digest the words they heard. They were unprepared for the call to their battle stations.

When the first torpedo hit, Stewart recalls exactly where he was at the time. "I was in the ship's barbershop. Usually on a Sunday morning we'd get together in the barbershop and shoot the breeze."

That day he was talking with three barbers. "Two of us made it and the other two didn't. Where they got killed I don't know for sure, probably on the top side."

"At first we assumed it was just another drill, but it wasn't. When the first torpedo hit the port side of the ship, which was right under the barbershop, it seemed like the ship came up out of the water a couple of feet and then went back down."

The surprise attack came at a time when the ship was not ready for the bombs and torpedoes being dropped. The greatest part of the Navy fleet had their guns secured, Stewart recalls. "We didn't have any ammunition to fire at the planes. They were dropping bombs and torpedoes when they came across Battleship Row. I was looking up and saw the big red blazing sun on the wings."

The planes were just clearing the ship's mast. "They had to be low to drop the torpedoes. As I was watching the planes and hearing the machine guns spraying the deck, wood was flying all over the place. Why they didn't hit me I don't know."

Stewart ran for cover inside the turret, but this was not a refuge for long.

His first battle station was in turret No. 2 where he was captain. The guns there were 14". "You can't shoot 14" guns at planes because they're too big."

Stewart's crew had not reported to the No. 2 turret so he went to his second station on the gun deck. At his second battle station — turret No. 4 — three five-inch guns were mounted on each side. There were four three-gun turrets and two two-gun turrets. "We also had a lot of 20 and 40" guns. I had a crew of 81, but when I got there, I had a crew of four."

"The lights went out and the ship began to list (turn over) fast and started to fill with water. It was really chaos."

Since he was second in command, the Blanchester area man



Roy Stewart holds some of the memorabilia he has from Pearl Harbor and World War II.

had to get permission to take action. "My turret officer was there. I said, 'Let me pass word to abandon ship.' The officer wouldn't let me pass word."

The Oklahoma staggered with the force of the blows. Water poured into the gaping holes on her side and flooded the very heart of the ship.

The men were ordered to remain below in the turret and many of them were trapped when the ship overturned, despite last minute efforts to abandon ship.

Stewart still recounts the violence of the capsizing ship which killed and injured many men. He also recalls the survivors' frantic search for an escape route.

Stewart said he lost 28 men from his crew. Though 52 years have passed, his mind still sees clearly the shipmates he knew so well. "If

I had it to do all over again I would have given the orders myself to abandon ship. I lost a lot of friends that day and during the war."

When the orders came to abandon ship, some of the sailors got out on the top side of the turret. Seven or eight of the men followed Stewart to the upper side of the ship in order to stay away from the machine gun fire.

"I was excited. It didn't dawn on me until two or three days later what had really happened. We had lost so many men. We were like brothers."

When they finally did abandon the Oklahoma, Stewart and the other sailors dove into the water and swam through the oil and debris to Ford Island where a few of the enlisted men and several pilots lived.

"I saw some of my shipmates after they swam over to the island. They were covered with oil. I didn't even recognize them."

As the torpedoes ripped open her side, the Oklahoma capsized to a 150 degree angle, 30 degrees of being vertically upside down. The bottom of the ship lay exposed and the men trapped inside began to bang on the inside of the hull. The rescue efforts got underway.

What made matters worse for the Oklahoma was that the ship was "wide open" that Sunday morning and, Stewart says that's the reason the ship turned over so fast. "We were to have our annual military inspection the next morning."

The day after the ship capsized — 36 hours later — 32 men came out alive after rescuers were able to cut into the ship and reach them. Other sailors weren't as lucky. A total of 448 men were killed on the Oklahoma.

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"I feel real lucky that I wasn't one of the casualties. I was one of the luckiest guys that ever walked that morning."

The attack did not come as a surprise to Stewart and some of the other sailors. "It didn't surprise the Navy a bit. I figured they were going to hit some time. Japanese submarines were all over the Hawaiian Islands for six weeks before they hit. We wanted to run them off or sink them but they (government officials) wouldn't let us. I said, 'some day we'll see Japanese planes coming over just like that.'

Stewart still feels World War II was necessary. "If we had not

gotten into the war, I'm sure Hitler would have won the war."

Since the Oklahoma was blocking part of the channel and a decision was made to raise her. The project began in 1943. The great battleship was righted and was being towed to San Francisco. Nearly halfway between Pearl Harbor and San Francisco the ship plunged to her grave, the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

Stewart had called the Oklahoma 'home' for 15 years. It was a home he loved and he found it hard to adjust to other assignments.

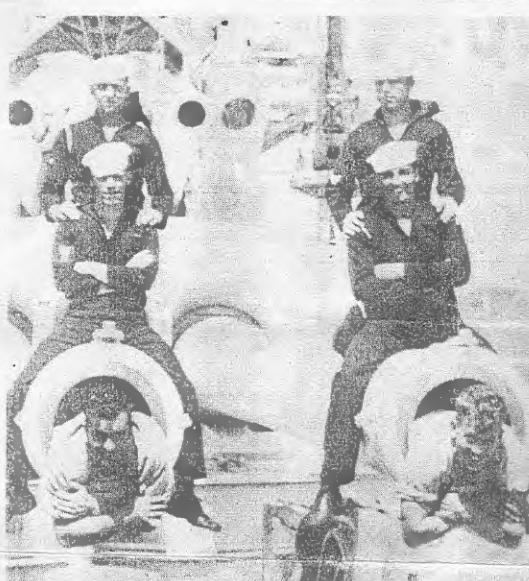
After Pearl Harbor most of the men went to sea again on other ships.

Stewart put two new cruisers and one aircraft carrier into commission and he spent 32 months in the South Pacific fighting the battles of war.

When World War II was over he began thinking about retirement. He called it quits in December, 1946. "I loved the Oklahoma and it wasn't the same after it was gone. I lost everything."

On display through this month at the Visitors Center of the USS Arizona Memorial is a three-dimensional scale replica of the Pearl Harbor naval installation, the way it was prior to the war. The display is entitled "Sunrise on the Fleet — 0:755 hours, December 7, 1941 — The Final Moment of Peace.

The display is a tribute to those individuals — both living and deceased — who experienced the events of that Sunday morning in our nation's history.



Roy Stewart, front left, and some of the crew of turret No. 4 on the USS Oklahoma pose while at sea. Stewart, who resides on Fayetteville-Blanchester Road, was a Seaman first class at the top of the picture was taken around 1937.



USS Oklahoma capsizes during Japanese attack